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### Big Dreams

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# Big Dreams

MICHAEL T. BENSON, PRESIDENT

Eastern Kentucky University

INTERIM HONORS DIRECTOR: DAVID COLEMAN

**E**ven with America in the midst of the Great Depression in the 1930s, Herman Donovan, then President of Eastern Kentucky State Teachers College, refused to cut corners on quality or make excuses. Bear in mind that our region contains what are to this day some of the poorest counties not just in Kentucky but in the entire nation. In that era, many students arrived at our Richmond campus with not much more than a knapsack and a dream.

As it turns out, President Donovan had a dream as well. He desired a student union facility that would not only serve the physical needs of Eastern students but also awe and inspire them and enrich their spirits. He wanted a building so grand that, regardless of where life took them, they would never feel out of place or intimidated by their surroundings.

Financed in part by a Public Works Administration grant, the Keen Johnson Building with its colonial Williamsburg exterior and art-deco interior—especially evident in its spacious ballroom—continues to awe and inspire today, though it long ago assumed other uses. Dozens of buildings of all types—some grand, others merely functional—have expanded our campus

skyline in the ensuing decades. Nonetheless, like a dream that will not die, the Keen Johnson Building remains to this day an institutional landmark, the one building that students, alumni, and townspeople alike most identify with what is now Eastern Kentucky University.

And so it is with a quality honors program, here or anywhere else. Just as the measure of these stately edifices far exceeds their brick and mortar, the value of an honors program lies not only in its curriculum but in the dreams it inspires. To this day, many students come to our honors program with little exposure to history's great thinkers, to cultural attractions that some take for granted, or to our magnificent large cities. Many arrive from the small towns and countryside that dominate much of Kentucky, every bit as bright as their big-city counterparts but unsure how they might measure up. Like those Eastern students who left here years ago confident that few buildings they would enter could ever top their own student union for grandeur, today's honors students know they can compete on a national stage with the best this country has to offer, whether they came from New York City or Monkey's Eyebrow (yes, that is an actual town in the Commonwealth of Kentucky).

As could be said on many campuses, the ECU Honors Program has become a point of pride, a touchstone of excellence with which we gratefully identify. As I see it, the true value of an outstanding honors program rests in four key areas:

1. It helps students learn not only how to think critically and creatively for themselves but also to work in teams. As students learn to dig deep within themselves to discover hidden talents, they also come to cherish, learn from, and even revel in the diversity all around them.
2. It is home to skilled and dedicated professors who can make any subject come alive in the classroom and then mentor their students in research projects to be presented at regional and national conferences, where students also participate in eye-opening and mind-expanding cultural excursions while building the camaraderie that long cross-country trips foster.
3. It helps students connect the dots through interdisciplinary study and then propels these students to help others do the same, making connections not only between diverse areas of study but also between thought and deed; this is why so many of our ECU Honors Program students are also leaders on our campus, go on to preeminent

positions in their workplaces and communities, and give back in turn to the university.

4. It benefits more than just the participating students. Faculty benefit from students who bring out the best in them, the university benefits in myriad ways from attracting more of the best and brightest students to its campus, and the surrounding communities and states benefit from graduates who are already good citizens and are supremely prepared to help tackle a wide array of workplace and societal challenges.

The Keen Johnson Building is symbolic of Eastern's historic role as a School of Opportunity. It is a place that has inspired generations of students, many from disadvantaged backgrounds, to dream big dreams. As architect Daniel Burnham once said, "Make no little plans." It is only fitting that the ECU Honors Program has for twenty-three consecutive years led all its peers in the number of student presenters at the annual National Collegiate Honors Council Conference; this is what a true School of Opportunity does.

The true value of this or any other quality honors program, though, cannot be measured in its longevity, its numbers, or even its awards. Nor can it be reduced to coursework, conferences, or culture; it rests in its ability to awe its students and inspire them to greatness, to enrich their spirits and make them feel that wherever life's travels take them, they are always in the right place to make a positive difference.

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